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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TOKYO 000698

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SUBJECT: FM ASO CHINA COMMENTS: ADVERTISEMENTS FOR HIMSELF?

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Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Joe Donovan. Reasons:1.4(b/d).

11. (C) Summary: Our contacts among Japan's China watchers believe FM Aso's recent provocative comments on Japan-China relations are a calculated effort by the Foreign Minister to boost his standing in the race for the LDP presidency. Without making such controversial statements, Aso would have little opportunity to attract attention to himself, they maintain. According to leading Diet members and academics, given CCS Abe's strong lead in the public opinion polls, Aso is probably trying to win PM Koizumi's personal support in the election campaign by making strong statements on the controversial Yasukuni Shrine issue. Our interlocutors note that Aso's nationalistic comments are well received by the LDP's increasingly conservative supporters. End Summary.

#### Provocative Statements

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12. (C) Over the past several weeks FM Aso has made a number of controversial statements connected to Japan's relations with China that have provoked negative responses from Beijing. On December 22 Aso stated that China was a "threat" to Japan due to its growing military capability. He followed that statement with a comment on January 29 that no foreign country should tell the Prime Minister he cannot go to Yasukuni Shrine, and that it would be advisable for the Emperor also to visit the shrine. On February 4 Aso said that as a Japanese colony Taiwan benefited from an improved educational system. MOFA's China Division has denied to the Embassy that such comments reflect any change in Japan's policy toward China. Moreover, in a January 31 position paper the cabinet declared that Japan does not recognize China as a threat. Chief Cabinet Secretary Abe was also quick to clarify to the press that the Foreign Minister's comment about the Emperor visiting Yasukuni Shrine was Aso's personal view.

#### Need to Attract Public Attention ...

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13. (C) Our contacts on Japan-China relations uniformly attribute FM Aso's comments to his desire to improve his

standing in the race to succeed PM Koizumi as LDP president when he steps down in September. LDP members among the general public as well as LDP Diet members will participate in the party's presidential election. Keio University Professor Tomoyuki Kojima observed to Embassy Tokyo political officer that since PM Koizumi consistently states that China's economic development is an opportunity for Japan, not a threat, and since previous foreign ministers have been very cautious in making statements concerning relations with China, Aso's statements only make sense in the context of the LDP presidential campaign. Such statements, Kojima said, help Aso stand out from the other candidates, providing a clear-cut difference between him and his rivals.

¶4. (C) Tokyo University Professor Akihiko Tanaka commented to the embassy that such statements are entirely in keeping with Aso's personality. He enjoys making provocative and unexpected statements, Tanaka maintained, and has frequently done so during his career as a Diet member. Tanaka believes the series of controversial statements must be part of Aso's calculation as to what is needed to make him an important figure in the race to succeed Koizumi, especially given CCS Abe's commanding lead in the public opinion polls. If Aso merely does a good, competent job as foreign minister, Tanaka opined, Aso will be forgotten by the public. He has a strong incentive to attract public attention, Tanaka stated.

#### And the Prime Minister's Support

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¶5. (C) LDP Diet Member Taro Kono told us that FM Aso might be trying to win PM Koizumi's support for the LDP presidency race by taking a strong anti-China stance, especially on Yasukuni. Given CCS Abe's strong popularity, it would be difficult for Aso to succeed Koizumi without the Prime Minister's explicit backing, Kono said. Supporting the Prime Minister on visits to Yasukuni may be one way to curry favor,

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he suggested. Kono said he was particularly surprised by Aso's comments regarding the Emperor visiting Yasukuni in that he and eight others dined with the Foreign Minister the night before Aso's statement. At the dinner, Aso told his dinner companions that he should give greater consideration to his position as Foreign Minister in making comments that concern Japan's relations with China. His statement on the Emperor the next day can only be explained by the LDP presidential campaign, Kono surmised.

¶6. (C) In a separate meeting with Embassy political officer, LDP Diet member and former LDP Secretary General Koichi Kato agreed that Aso's comments are due to the LDP race, noting that Aso's statements lack balance and are far from the official government position on the issues. Nonetheless, Kato observed, Aso's statements have found wide support among traditional LDP supporters. The LDP membership is becoming increasingly conservative and nationalistic, especially with regard to China, he said. Kato averred that the majority of LDP voters are anti-China. Aso's comments justifying Japan's colonialization of Taiwan would be particularly pleasing to LDP supporters, he said. Kato also thought that Aso was trying to win the Prime Minister's support in the LDP race, but opined that even with Koizumi's backing, Aso would not be elected.

#### Comment

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¶7. (C) Of all the contenders, Aso has been the most vocal in publicly stating his desire to become the next prime minister. However, at 20 to 30 points behind CCS Abe in the polls, Aso may feel he has to do something to shake up the race. While his statements on the Japan-China relationship have not followed the usual practice of Japanese foreign ministers, they have garnered him a lot of media attention. For his part Abe has been cautious and moderate in his public

comments, sticking to his role as the government's chief spokesman and letting his reputation as a nationalist hard-liner speak for itself.  
SCHIEFFER